

# National Marriage and Divorce Statistics

—Progress Report, 1945–1955—

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WITH the increased emphasis on the family, as well as the individual, as a basic unit around which to plan public health activities, the need for statistics on family formation and family dissolution is generally recognized. The consequent increase in the demand for statistics on marriages and divorces has stimulated the development of registration systems, particularly within the last decade.

In general, State departments of health collect, process, and publish the vital statistics of individual States. Location of the State files or indexes of marriages and divorces in the vital statistics offices places the job of handling these records in the hands of persons already skilled in the management of vital records and saves the added overhead costs that would be incurred by establishing separate offices.

## Increase in States With Central Files

The number of areas that maintain central files of marriage and divorce records has steadily increased. This is important since areas that do not maintain such files are not in a position to provide comprehensive statistics. In 1945, 34 areas maintained central files of

marriage records. By the end of 1954, 40 areas—36 States, 3 Territories, and 1 independent city—maintained central files (fig. 1). Divorce records were centrally filed in 23 areas in 1945. At the end of 1954, these records were centrally filed in 34 areas—30 States, 3 Territories, and 1 independent registration area (fig. 2).

In areas with no central files, it is possible to obtain certain data, but these are limited in scope and often incomplete in coverage.

## Standardizing Report Forms

Since 1945, great progress has been made toward standardizing the items of information to be obtained on marriage and divorce report forms. In 1954, the standard record of marriage and the standard record of divorce or annulment prepared by the Public Health Service were formally endorsed by the Public Health Conference on Records and Statistics, a cooperative organization made up of official representatives of the vital registration and public health statistical activities of each State, Territory, and independent registration area. A long period of discussion had preceded this action by conference members (1). The conference also recommended a list of optional items for inclusion on the State report forms to provide data for more intensive study of marriages and divorces.

Although some users of marriage and divorce

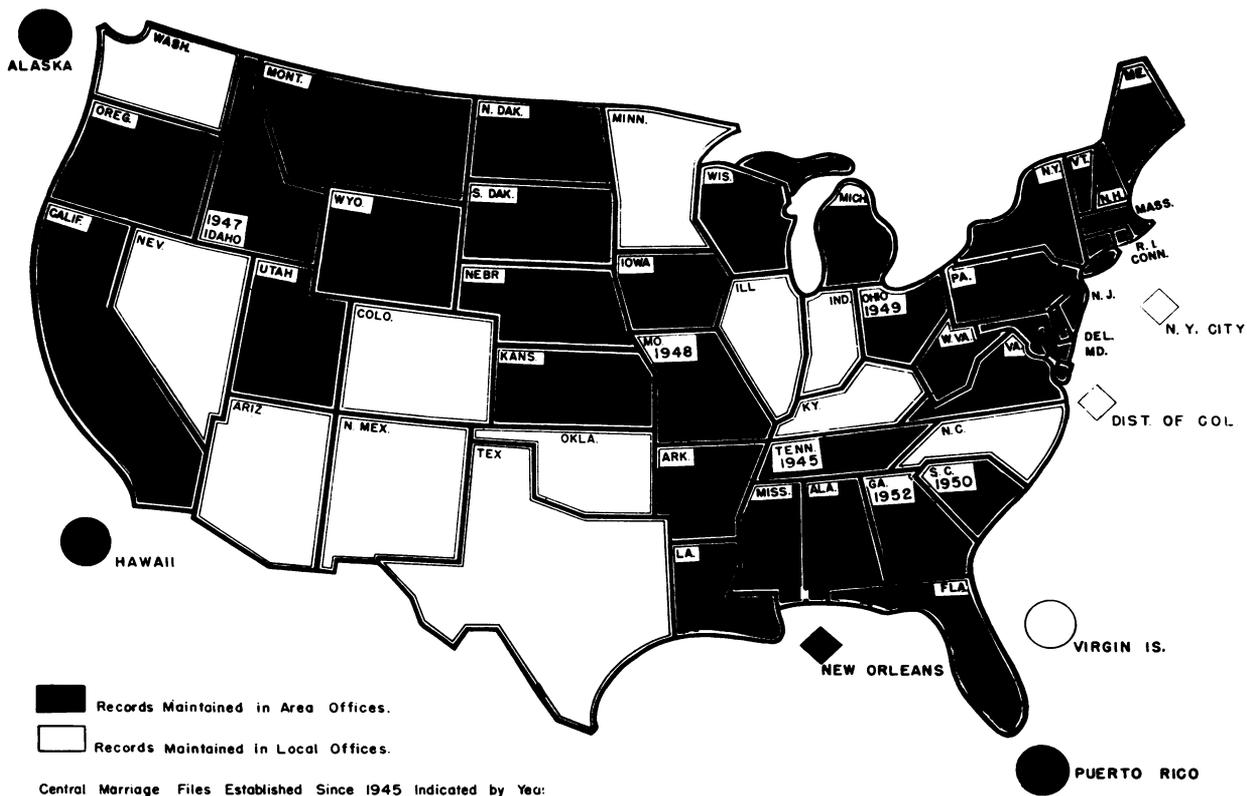
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Figure 2. Thirty-four areas maintaining centralized divorce records, 1954.



areas began with 1949 data. At that time regular reports were received from 16 areas (12). By 1954 the number of areas reporting divorces each month totaled 30 (13).

National statistics on the social characteristics of persons at the time of marriage are also being compiled on the basis of national sample surveys conducted in cooperation with the Bureau of the Census. The first of these surveys was carried out in 1953 (17) and the second, in 1954. These sample surveys have provided a valuable supplement to the presently incomplete data obtained from registration records. Additional reports will provide data on economic and social characteristics of recently married persons.

#### Plans for the Future

The Working Group on Marriage and Divorce of the Public Health Conference on Records and Statistics has recommended certain steps to improve national marriage and divorce

statistics. These recommendations have been given a vote of approval by the great majority of the members of the conference and are now being implemented as follows:

A registration area for marriage statistics is to be established, effective January 1, 1956. One year later a registration area for divorce statistics will be established. The criteria for admitting a State or an independent registration area to the marriage registration area, and later, to the divorce registration area, have been agreed upon. These include—

1. Central record files for marriages and divorces containing items on the standard record of marriage and standard record of divorce or annulment forms, in the State office.
2. Adoption of report forms of marriage and divorce containing the items on the standard record of marriage and standard record of divorce or annulment forms.
3. Regular reports to the State office by all local areas.
4. Agreement between State office and the

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## Information Requested on Standard Record of Marriage

### Items on Form:

County

State file No.

### Application for marriage license:

For both bride and groom—

Name (first, middle, last)

Date of birth (month, day, year)

Usual residence (State, county, city, or town)

Place of birth (State or foreign country)

Previous marital status

Number of previous marriages

Color or race

Usual occupation

Kind of business or industry

Date and signatures of applicants

### Certification:

Date of marriage (month, day, year)

Place of marriage (county, State)

Date of recording

Signature and title of official making return to State health department

### Optional Additional Items Recommended by the Working Group on Marriage and Divorce:

In States receiving original records of marriage, the word "Certificate" may be substituted for "Record."

In addition to "State file No.," provision may be made for "Local file No."

In item for "Usual residence," provision may be made for "Street address or RFD No."

### The following items may be added:

Names of parents

Name or signature, title, and denomination of officiant

Religious preference or denomination of bride and groom

### Possible additional items:

The item "Highest grade of school completed" has merit as an optional item for States that may be interested in the subject, although it was not discussed at the last meeting of the working group.

National Office of Vital Statistics on joint testing of reporting for completeness and accuracy.

The key criterion relates to tests of completeness and accuracy. Agreement is to be reached between the National Office of Vital Statistics and the individual States regarding the tests to be carried out in each State. These tests will aid in locating any imperfections in the reporting system of a given State so that remedial steps may be taken. In the preparation of a working document on tests of completeness and accuracy of marriage reporting, it became evident that the index to State files of marriage records was of crucial importance; consequently, a detailed study of such State indexes is being made. In the fall of 1955, it is planned to provide the Working Group on Marriage and Divorce with data on all States maintaining central files of marriage records and to ask the advice of the working group regarding the States to be admitted to the marriage registration area in January 1956.

A marriage registration test (MRT) in connection with the 1960 census has been proposed by several State registrars. This would parallel the birth registration test (BRT) in 1940 and 1950. This possible project will be explored with officials of the Bureau of the Census. A divorce registration test in 1960 has been suggested.

Further exploration will be made of sample surveys in obtaining useful marriage and divorce data. The results obtained so far are distinctly encouraging.

The needs of the consumers of marriage and divorce statistics will be studied by subcommittees of the United States National Committee on Vital and Health Statistics appointed by the Surgeon General of the Public Health Service. A subcommittee on utilization of marriage statistics is bringing together persons with varied interests to determine the types of information most useful to major consumer groups. It may propose a consumer survey. A similar committee on divorce statistics will be established at a later date. The reports of these two committees will provide a basis for possible modification of the program of marriage and divorce statistics to meet the needs of the consumers.

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## Information Requested on Standard Record of Divorce or Annulment

### Items on Form:

County

State file No.

Local file No.

For husband—

Name, (first, middle, last)

For wife—

Maiden name (first, middle, last)

For both husband and wife:

Date of birth (month, day, year)

Usual residence (city, county, State)

Place of birth (State or foreign country)

Number of this marriage

Race or color

Usual occupation

Kind of business or industry

Place of this marriage

Date of marriage (month, day, year)

Number of children under 18

Plaintiff

Decree granted to

Legal grounds for decree

### Optional Additional Items Recommended by the Working Group on Marriage and Divorce:

In States that grant other than absolute divorces, title may include word "Absolute."

In item "Usual residence," provision may be made for "Street address or RFD No."

To item "Number of children under 18" may be added "Number of children born alive this marriage."

To item "Legal grounds for decree" may be added "Number of children to custody of—husband; wife; other (specify)".

To item "Number of this marriage" may be added "Last marriage ended by—death, divorce, annulment."

To item "Place of this marriage" may be added "Date of separation" and "Place of separation."

### Possible additional items:

The item "Highest grade of school completed" has merit as an optional item for States that may be interested in the subject, although it was not discussed at the last meeting of the working group.

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### PHS Civil Defense Training

The Public Health Service has offered the first of a series of 2-week training courses for physicians and other professional health personnel who would be called to duty in the event of enemy action or other national emergency.

The training courses are a phase of the Service's recently announced emergency program to expand its Commissioned Reserve Corps by 5,000 officers before July 1, 1956.

The course started on March 14, 1955. A second 2-week course is scheduled for May 15. Additional courses will be scheduled later.

Each course covers two main categories: one, the tasks with which a health department staff is generally familiar but for which additional help is required, such as those created by extensive disruption of public facilities and mass displacement of civilians in consequence of enemy action or natural disaster; and, two, the unusual tasks for which new skills as well as additional help may be needed by a health department, such as chemical, biological, and radiological warfare defense, epidemic reporting, monitoring radioactivity, decontamination, and related action.

During the first week, trainees spend 3 days at the Federal Civil Defense Administration Staff College at Olney, Md., on the outskirts of Washington, D. C. There they receive briefing on the strategic aspects of civil defense. The remainder of the period is spent at Public Health Service headquarters in Washington.

Additional information may be obtained from: Chief, Training Branch, Division of Personnel, Public Health Service, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Washington 25, D. C.